

# Despite toxics, fish still lure fishermen

PCBs pollute a reservoir and canal, but the carp, catfish and gar are coveted

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DONNA, Texas — Signs bearing a skull and crossbones dot the banks of a reservoir and canal near this town on the U.S.-Mexico border, but the fishermen standing in the reeds nearby ignore them, casually reeling in fish that are contaminated with toxic chemicals and banned for human consumption.

Some do it to quell their hunger, others to make some cash by selling the carp, catfish and gar in nearby neighborhoods.

"It's a great little lake," says Joe Garcia, 43, among those fishing here one day recently, where a carp with the highest levels of toxic PCB chemicals tested in a fish was caught years ago. He says he throws back his catch, but a lot of others can't afford to pass up the meal.

The reservoir is one of thousands of sites along the U.S.-Mexico border where industry, pesticide use and population growth left hazards in past decades that await solutions. Donna is among the worst — earning a place on the Environmental Protection Agency's priority list — and illustrates how slowly the government cleanup process moves and how those struggling for subsistence in poor areas like this sometimes do not wait.

Four years after the site made the priority list, the EPA plans to soon begin extensive sampling of the water, sediment and fish that could

become the foundation for a cleanup plan.

But with limited funds and an elaborate process, the effort could take years, leaving authorities to educate a population that is often more concerned with daily survival than warnings of potential problems.

State and federal officials have repeatedly gone door-to-door to warn residents since PCB contamination was discovered in 1993. Twice federal authorities used electric charges to kill more than 35,000 fish in the reservoir and the 6½-mile canal that brings water from the Rio Grande. But the fish — at least 22 species, including tilapia and largemouth bass — repopulate.

Officials believe many area residents fish to supplement their diet. But in the fatty tissue of the fish are polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, an industrial residue apparently emanating from something dumped in the canal years ago. Officials say it could be a submerged piece of machinery, but haven't been able to find it.

PCBs, typically found as oily liquids in electrical equipment, have been banned in the U.S. since 1979 after causing cancer in animal testing. Researchers believe the chemicals can lead to lower birth weights, suppress the immune system and increase the risk of cancer.

A carp caught in the Donna canal 19 years ago contained more than 1,500 times the limit of PCBs believed safe, the highest such reading. Members of the family who ate it had elevated PCB levels in their blood. Readings taken since then in the lake have been lower, but still in the hazardous range.

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